

Advisory Board on Romani Affairs in Finland

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Advisory Board on Romani Affairs

The task of the Advisory Board on Romani Affairs is to enhance the equal participation of the Roma population in the Finnish society, to improve their living conditions and socio-economic position and to promote their culture. Its work includes cooperation and expert help in matters involving the Roma and the authorities in Finland. The Government appointed the first Advisory Board on Romani Affairs in 1989, but its work actually began in 1956 under the name Advisory Board on Gypsy Affairs. The Advisory Board functions in conjunction with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

The Government appoints the Advisory Board for three years at a time. The Advisory Board includes a chairperson, a vice-chairperson and a maximum of 16 other members. Half of the members represent the Roma population; the other half represent the administrative sectors of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of the Environment, and the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities. The Advisory Board employs a full time General Secretary and a secretary. The General Secretary prepares the work of the Advisory Board and carries out its decisions.

The Advisory Board convenes about ten times per year. The work section prepares matters to be brought up at meetings. Every year the Advisory Board organises seminars, to which both authorities and representatives of the Roma population are invited. The seminars deal with current themes of development included in the annual action plan of the Advisory Board. The Advisory Board has long been involved in Nordic cooperation.

The task of the Advisory Board on Romani Affairs is to

- monitor the development of the social participation and living conditions of the Roma in order to promote equality;
- by taking initiative and making proposals, improve the social and economic position and promote the culture and employment of the Roma population;
- work to eliminate discrimination;
- promote the Romani language and culture;
- take part in Nordic and other international cooperation in order to improve the position of the Roma;
- provide statements on the position of the Roma for other authorities and organisations, and provide expert statements for example concerning how Finland follows the relevant international agreements.

Present challenges

The focuses of the Advisory Board's activity are for example matters concerning housing and education, cultural affairs, employment and information. In educational matters, the focus is on pre-school education and adult education.

The Advisory Board actively works to prevent work-related discrimination and to improve employment. The general goal is to prevent and eliminate discrimination.

Provincial Advisory Boards

There are four Provincial Advisory Boards on Romani Affairs. The task of the Provincial Advisory Boards is to support the local cooperation and Roma participation in municipalities and to prevent prejudice. Furthermore, they function as a cooperation body between the Roma and the authorities and launch development projects with a view to improving the position of the Roma population. The Provincial Advisory Boards have contributed to the fulfilment of the principle of subsidiarity at the local level. They have existed for almost ten years and the experiences gained from their work are positive. Half of the members are Roma and the other half are civil servants.

Cooperation

The Advisory Board has influenced the development of Finnish legislation and administration in matters regarding the Roma. At its initiative, a Romani Education Unit was created within the National Board of Education in 1994. The right of the Roma to their language and culture was included in the Constitution in 2000.

In the work of the Advisory Board, international cooperation and related matters have increased considerably during the past few years. New tasks are brought about by the development of international and national legislation on human rights, minorities, and discrimination. The Advisory Board on Romani Affairs closely cooperates with the authorities, organisations and other groups, such as the Provincial Advisory Boards and the Ombudsman for Minorities working in conjunction with the Ministry of Labour. The Advisory Board is paying close attention to the founding of the European Roma Forum (ERF), which is the result of an initiative made by the President of Finland, Ms Tarja Halonen. In the Forum, the Roma themselves actively work to improve their position and living conditions at the European level.

The Advisory Board has a Finnish language website: www.romani.fi. The purpose of the site is to provide an extensive information package on Romani affairs and to promote knowledge of the Roma culture.

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